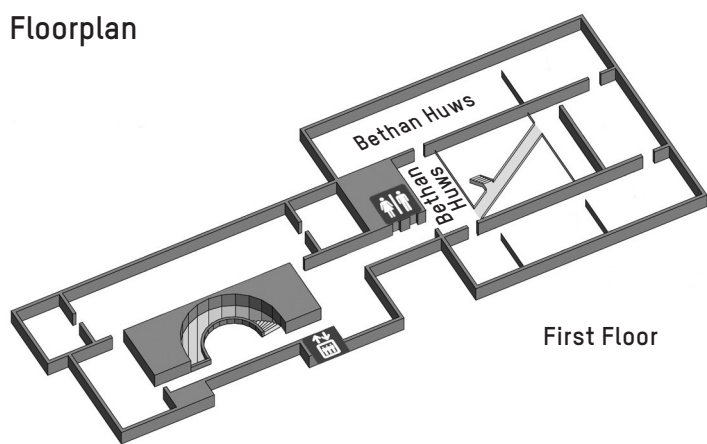


Bethan Huws: Reading Duchamp, Research Notes 2007 – 2014

October 24, 2014 – February 1, 2015

Floorplan



“An art work can be anything we want it to be / our own vision, our own notion, our dream / our wish / what we want, desire, hope for the future / as long as we can find others that have a similar vision.”

Bethan Huws 1997 ¹

Remarks on Bethan Huws and Her Research on Marcel Duchamp

When Bethan Huws, born 1961 in Bangor, Wales, was invited in 1993 to exhibit in the Mies van der Rohe building *Haus Esters* in Krefeld, she found the architecture so amazing that she wanted to leave everything as it was. As an alternative, she responded by representing her ideas in writing, reflecting on the prerequisites and possibilities of art and the role of artists in general.² In the following two years Huws did not make any new works and did not participate in any exhibitions, but did produce numerous texts in which she reconsidered all her previous assumptions about her art, striving to gain a general overview of her potential goals. The path of this self-examination led through philosophy, psychology, linguistics and art history. It made her compare the ideas of others with her own artistic experience and knowledge. In this way she

made *Origin and Source* (1993–95), adopting a complex process of revision and restratification, creating a collage-like compendium comprising a total of six volumes and 1342 pages of notes, quotes and drawings – which could easily be called a “conglomerate of an ongoing consciousness process.”³ In the texts, Huws reviews and reaffirms her ideas and language, and the actual work of art is constituted in grasping thought processes about what makes art art.⁴ In keeping with the tradition of Conceptual Art, these threads of thought are “not at the forefront, but already part of the venue of the artwork.”⁵ The artwork is generated performatively by reading the fragments of texts. At the same time, questioning what qualifies art as such in the medium of language leads to reflecting on language as a medium and an art material: “Language is the preponderant topic of Huws’ work because it enables the articulation of meaning, and structures what is said and sayable. It is both an artefact and a system open to transformation and modification by the speech acts of its speakers. It mediates remembrance and innovation and makes the disclosure of a speaker, as a particular, situated individual possible.”⁶ Both in language and in art, the key concern is producing meaning, and therefore Huws’s conception of an artwork is “a reflection on what art actually is”, searching for the “foundations, if not even the origins of artistic thought” in language.⁷ Art must therefore have meaning that is both comprehensible and is open to interpretation.⁸ Because as Huws observed, if it has its own meaning, then “artists don’t make works in order to understand them (we understand them, or how else could we make them?) That’s logical. We make them based on the assumption that you will equally understand them.”⁹ In the notion that an artwork first becomes art through interpretation or comprehending what it means, Bethan Huws sees eye to eye with Marcel Duchamp, who wrote in 1957 that: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”¹⁰ Since the nineteen-nineties, Bethan Huws has been investigating Marcel Duchamp’s (1887–1968) artworks and remarks on art as fertile ground for her own art. Since 2007 she has compiled several thousand *Research Notes* on his work and on his ideas, which in its entirety will now be showing at the Kunstmuseum Bern for the first time to the public as an installation and a three-dimensional *Mind Map*.¹¹ Like her work at *Haus Esters*, Bethan Huws assembled together a wealth of insights gained through her “readings”, through her research and notes on the interrelationships and referentiality of Marcel Duchamp’s art. She interprets his works of art and retraces his thought processes. However, she does not adopt an art-historical approach, but investigates Duchamp’s work by applying his own methods and strategies. She grasps his work via language and strives to create a basis for comprehending it. Huws plumbs the

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essence of art anew via this approach, which, at the same time, converges with her pursuits in her own work. After all, both artists rely heavily on language in their work and, in it, reflect on the nature of art. Thus Marcel Duchamp commented in a 1961 interview that, “for me, words are not merely a means of communication. You know, puns have always been considered a low form of wit, but I find them a source of stimulation both because of their actual sound and because of unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationship of disparate words. For me, this is an infinite field of joy”.¹² And Bethan Huws observes that: “I think Duchamp seems to have swapped the colours of the painter for the sound of words. He uses the sound of words exactly in the same manner as he was using the colours in his painting. It’s purely the beauty of the sound. It’s really just pure sound. His relation is to the spirit, not to the word. That’s what is interesting about Duchamp. Many art historians aren’t creative enough when they’re looking at Duchamp. They read it word for word and they are trapped into a too literal reading. You have to understand the feelings, the spirit, the thing, not only the word. Duchamp is really working consciously, if you like, with the sound and the image. He’s consciously balancing between sense and reason all the time.”¹³ The insights Bethan Huws gains and the observations she makes in her intensive study again and again influence her new works of art, as for example in *Word Vitrines*,¹⁴ spatial text works, neon objects and installations¹⁵ or in the film *Fountain* (2009).

Bethan Huws’s interest concentrates on the ready-made as Duchamp’s most important achievement. This was not because an industrial product was declared art by being relocated to the museum, but because in the ready-made an object is divorced of its original meaning. Bethan Huws has an expanded notion of the ready-made, making it include also landscapes, plants or earlier artworks. Thus she declared in *Origin and Source*: “If you don’t take something out of its context, but rather move the whole context, that would be a work of art.”¹⁶ Consequently, transposing an object into an art context does not suffice to imbue it with the status of being art. Instead, decisive for Huws is “the transposition of the whole context that this object stands for”.¹⁷ By presenting the comprehensive context of Marcel Duchamp’s art in her *Research Notes* in an art space, Huws makes the ready-made *Marcel Duchamp* into art. In this way, she is in keeping with Marcel Duchamp, who in novel ways interpreted the masterpieces of artists like Lucas Cranach, August Rodin, Ingres or Gustave Courbet in a diversity of prints.¹⁸ Simultaneously, her room-filling installation corresponds with the situation in her studio in Berlin when she presented her research results to an art historian. Her research sketches engage with some seventy of Duchamp’s works, among them his famous pieces, such as the painting *Nu descendant un escalier* (*Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912), his *Large Glass* or *La mariée mise à nu par ses Célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Bachelors, Even*, 1915–23), or his installation *Etant Donnés* (*Given*, 1946–66). This group of Huws’s works are arranged together on the walls, while folders on the tables contain her observations about the general prevailing categories in the art of Duchamp. Because there is no prescribed path to follow for reading the notes, visitors can explore Duchamp’s oeuvre of their own accord, or leaf through the folders and thus study Duchamp’s use of numbers, colour or iconographic motifs. Bethan Huws’s individual readings reveal the underlying structure of Duchamp’s thought, reconstructing it with the help of numerous references. In contrast to an academic, art-historical approach in investigating her predecessor’s work, Huws dares to not fill all the gaps in her research while also allowing her subjective interests to shine through and provide scope for conjectures about her work. Her comprehensive study of this leading figure of Modernism, together with the insights she wins in this way, make up an unconventional contribution to art history of Modernist and contemporary art. The approach adopted by Bethan Huws for this installation is called “artistic research” or “art-based research”, a later form of Conceptualism. An undertaking of acknowledging art as a knowledge-acquisition system has been gaining ground

since the nineteen-nineties, putting it on equal footing with philosophy and science in attaining knowledge. Such practices extend beyond the conventions of the traditional disciplines. According to Dieter Mersch, we are concerned with “the discovery of a knowledge practice in its own right, a practice that can be neither reduced to scientific knowledge nor to philosophical thought, that, as it were, operates in a different terrain and therefore asks different questions and provokes different answers.”¹⁹

Bethan Huws, who works with language, drawings, objects and neon objects, is situated at the other end of a development in art, which, initiated by Duchamp, inquires into the fundamentals of the creative urge and presents this for discussion through artistic intervention. For both artists it was significant that their actions become art not because of the resulting objects but because art practices were being examined. However, at the same time Bethan Huws constantly points out the limits of interpretation and warns us to not take Duchamp, and perhaps also herself, too literally and too seriously. Duchamp’s many references to the Bible symbolize his misgivings about art. Like religion, art asserts itself with the aid of analogies, which we ultimately can neither prove true nor false. Duchamp’s multifarious references to virgins or virginity do not allude to a religious or mythological figure but embody thought free of bias, the virginity of a pure and unprejudiced way of looking at things. The motif serves as an analogy for a mental state that both Duchamp and Huws call for in art and for art.

¹ Reprinted in *Bethan Huws. Selected Textual Works 1991–2003*, publ. by Dieter Association Paris, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2003, p. 83.

² On this topic see Hans-Rudolf Reust, “To Start by Writing – Acts of Thinking in the Gerund. Visualising / Presenting a Textual Work by Bethan Huws”, in Düsseldorf 2003, pp. 50–65.

³ Julian Heynen, “... il ne bouge pas”, in *Bethan Huws. Il est comme un saint dans sa niche. Il ne bouge pas*, exh. cat. Daadgalerie Berlin 2009, Kestner-Gesellschaft Hanover 2010, p. 94.

⁴ “What is important in *Origin and Source* is neither the withdrawal of the artist nor indeed her exploration of the doubts and grounds of her artistic principles. It is the fact that she decided to exhibit it and make it one of her works. In this way she defined the retreat, the fragment, the doubt, the collapse even, as valid artistic approaches.” Vincent Honoré, “What’s the Point?”, in: *Bethan Huws. Fountain*, exh. cat. Museu de Serralves, Porto, 2009, p. 285.

⁵ Heynen 2009, p. 94.

⁶ Gregory Salzmann, “*Illocution Function/Use Interpretieren*”, in: Düsseldorf 2003, p. 120.

⁷ Ulrich Loock, “From To”, in: Düsseldorf 2003, p. 136.

⁸ See Ulrich Loock, “Meaning, Memory, Ready-Made” in Porto 2009, p. 268.

⁹ Quoted in Julian Heynen, “Odyssee: At the base of the brain there is a fountain”, in *Bethan Huws*, exh. cat. Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht 2006, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen 2007, p. 76.

¹⁰ Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act” (Session April 1957, Convention of the American Federation of Arts), in: Robert Lebel, Marcel Duchamp (New York, 1959), pp. 77–78. Cf. also Marcel Duchamp (1965): “The onlooker is as important as the artist. In spite of what the artist thinks he is doing, something stays on that is completely independent of what he intended, and that something is grabbed by society – if he is lucky. The artist himself doesn’t count. Society just takes what it wants.” In Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant Garde* (New York, NY, 1968), p. 18.

¹¹ Individual research notes have already been shown in exhibitions at Daadgalerie Berlin in 2009, at the Museu Serralves, Porto, in 2009, as well as at the Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover, in 2010.

¹² *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, ed. Francis M. Naumann and Rudolf Kuenzli (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 6.

¹³ A discussion between Bethan Huws and Kathleen Bühler, 18 June 2014.

¹⁴ *Untitled*, 2004 (Piss off I’m a fountain); *Untitled*, 1999 (The ready-made a metaphor); *Untitled*, 2008 (le ready-made...); *Untitled*, 2008 (Et Duchamp?...); *Untitled*, 2004–06 (*Nu descendant un escalier*).

¹⁵ *Forest*, 2008–09; *At the Base of the Brain There Is a Fountain*, 2009; *Au fond du cerveau il y a une fontaine*, 2007; *Eau & Gaz à tous les étages*, 2008; *Pierre de touche*, 2009.

¹⁶ See Heynen 2009, p. 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See catalogue raisonné nos 645, 647, 649, 651, 653, in: Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, vol. 1, revised and expanded paperback edition (New York, 2000).

¹⁹ Dieter Mersch, “Kunst als epistemische Praxis. Ästhetische Reflexionen der Wissenschaften”, in Elke Bippus (ed.), *Kunst des Forschens. Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens*, p. 46.

INFOS

Curator

Kathleen Bühler

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Public holidays

Dec. 25, 2014: closed

Dec. 31, 2014 / Jan. 1 / Jan 2, 2015: 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

ARTIST'S BOOK

BETHAN HUWS. RESEARCH NOTES

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AGENDA

Öffentliche Führungen

Sonntag, 11h: 26. Oktober, 21. Dezember

Dienstag, 19h: 25. November, 16.*/30. Dezember, 13. Januar

* mit der Kuratorin Kathleen Bühler und Hans Rudolf Reust, Kunstkritiker

Einführungsveranstaltung für Lehrpersonen

Kunst Heute/Bethan Huws

Dienstag, 4. November, 18h

Öffentliche Workshop-Reihe im Rahmen der Ausstellung

Jeweils 18h-20h

Dienstag, 18. November 2014

mit Hans Rudolf Reust und Ulrich Loock: Reading, Re-reading

Dienstag, 9. Dezember 2014

mit Annaïk Lou Pitteloud und Steve Van den Bosch: Re-enactment

Dienstag, 27. Januar 2014

mit Ulrich Loock und Bettina Klein: Research

Kosten: Ausstellungseintritt, keine Anmeldung erforderlich

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